

Back Again, Back Again: Nonbeliever

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode four:
Nonbeliever

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: We made it out of the city. Day faded into night - we slept in a barn, Callia and I, neither of us particularly trusting of the other to keep watch and neither of us particularly wanting to lay our head too close to the other. Hay is not comfortable, I learned, despite how it seemed in the movies, but it was safe. Safer. Better than what I'd left behind.

Where are the others? I asked her in the dark. *When will we meet them again?* The second part, as it was me and all of my Rhysean was shitty and disjointed, came out more, *we are going to meet them again, yes?*

What I *really* had meant was, *where is Rhia? Is Rhia alright?* I do not want to be separated from her. I want to make sure she knows that I care, but that both required more words than I could confidently drum up and also more emotional vulnerability than I was willing to sacrifice to Callia.

I tried to remind myself that last I had seen Rhia, Iolo had her, and Iolo would take better care of her than I ever could. Had - had taken better care. Had staged an entire rescue for her - I wasn't stupid enough to pretend it was for me. I was a lot of things, and *sensible* was once again making its way onto the list. I understood that if there was a way to cut me out of the prophecy, to cut me out of the deal - if I wasn't magic, if I couldn't awaken little sparks of magic, if my existence here wasn't fucking *foretold* - it would have been so much easier for them to get rid of me, or ignore me, or - kill me - and make their own chosen three. To - not have to coddle someone barely passable with a sword. Not have to pretend to like someone who had killed their friends and still sort of loved the boy they loathed more than all else.

Who would I have chosen? If it were up to me? If I wasn't a part of the prophecy, but some bystander, leaning over readjusting fate. Leander - even if they hadn't been magic. Rhia - she would be me, the better me. She would rule and it would be good and just, because she was, because she knew how to be

gentler and kinder than me in a way that made everyone else want to create the same sort of light. And - Callia?

Callia.

Callia, who *knew* me even if she didn't understand me in the slightest. Callia, who'd fought her way up two flights of stairs in an enemy castle and still managed to make her way back down. Callia, who the *fretim*, clearly, believed in. Callia, who Rhia had believed in. Callia, who could pick up my sword. Callia, who was - awake.

Still.

It was supposed to be my turn on watch, but Callia wasn't asleep. One hand was still tensed around the hilt of the dagger at her thigh; the other twisted a piece of straw around her fingers. Her eyes were half-lidded, but that was enough. She was still alert, didn't trust me not to let my guard down. I might as well have taken advantage of it.

My sword, I finally said, into the dark.

She closed her eyes and settled back further. *I am asleep, eligidida.*

No, you're not, I said, wishing I knew how to fit *clearly* into that sentence. Wishing I knew how to form something, anything, other than only the most utilitarian of sentences. *We're talking. My sword. You can* - I didn't know the words for *pick it up*. I couldn't remember where the word *it* would go in

the sentence, anyways. Before the verb? Attached to the end?

Lamely, I repeated, *you can lift my sword.*

She sighed, a long, over-exaggerated thing through her nose, and muttered something to herself. *Is that* - something I didn't know - *unique*? Sarcasm, in the couple of times I'd heard it from Rhia or Cassian in Rhysean, had sounded like this. There was a tonal shift that happened that we don't have in English - the way you emphasized the first syllables of words. It almost added another layer to the barb - *in case you're too slow to catch on, I'm making fun of you right now.*

I pretended not to notice. Yes, I said, playing at earnest. *But - I believe that you know that.*

Callia sighed again, unimpressed, so I added, *you're magic.*

A confirmation. Not a question.

She sat up, annoyance coating her action, and I realized with a jolt that her eyes - gold - glowed strangely in the dark. No - not *glowed*. But - it was dark in this barn, no light save for the sliver of moonlight through the hayloft window, and yet her irises glinted in the low light. Almost reflective - but that wasn't right either. It was - *unnatural* in the definition of *not normally occurring, not a product of here*. It was *unnatural* in the definition of *I can't explain it, because it was magic*. The *magic*.

Again, I felt that tug in my chest.

Which one? I asked. Soldier, or king?

Her lip curled. I'm not - enautoeligidae, she spat, staring daggers at me. Rex et poeta et soldat, it's nonsense. It breeds tyrants and false prophets.

I sat back in shock. What?

Callia snorted a laugh, an awful thing that came from memories of betrayal. She spoke slowly, painfully simply, as if she knew how stupid I was and wanted to be sure I understood. You cannot expect a children's story to save this world. It was a kind lie that the people created and your prometide et tyrannus took and made their own. Where did they find you, Eligidida, with your hair? Much, much further north? Where have they been hiding you all this time? I am not stupid enough to think there is a beyond here. I am not stupid enough to believe you are from another world. I am not stupid enough to believe in arborellems.

The heat that flushed my face soured something in my chest, made it go rotten and spill bile across the back of my throat. You - don't know me. That was, in fact, precisely the wrong thing to say.

She cackled, but the joy had been scrubbed from the act. Mirth sat thick in her voice. How right you are! I know nothing of you, eligidida, and I don't trust you besides. I am not stupid enough to think that we do not need you - we need the

support of any people we can find. But I am not naive enough to believe you are anything more than a stupid little child. You are not a savior. You are enautoeligidae that so many have confused for something greater.

This word again, I snapped, enautoeligidae. The remnants of my own title rang through it, but that made me more nervous, with the way she spat it out. I could hear my voice, almost a whine, almost a plea, mostly an embarrassment, as I confessed, I don't know what it means.

Loathing. From the sliver of hayloft moonlight that cut her face into fragments, I watched half her mouth twist into something part frown and part sneer and part dreadful, angry confirmation of a suspected truth. That gives me no surprise, she said snidely. It is someone who struts around, thinking they are saving others who were fine on their own and the fool had no business saving.

But I'm - "foretold," I wanted to say, but didn't have the word. The sour feeling returned, an inkling that she may have been a little bit right. But I - I tried again, and this time it came out closer to a whine. I didn't know enough words to have this conversation and have it well. I hated that she was right, that there was nothing I could do to disprove that one little statement, I am not surprised. I'd been struggling to keep up

the entire time I'd been with her. How sheltered I was. How little I truly knew.

I wished, for a second, a millisecond, before shutting it down, that I had Cassian with me to talk through it all, for a comforting voice. Then I remembered what he had done, and what I had done, and the reason Rhia and I were separated and the reason the smell of smoke had folded itself into our clothes and carried with us all this way. I told myself I did not want Cassian with me, and sidetracked.

You don't believe in magic. I tried to do the sarcasm-thing - over-emphasizing the first syllables of the words to try and get across in my tone what I didn't actually have the words to say. Meaning - *you're joking, saying you don't believe in magic.*

Callia snorted. *I know of the witches and nature and the magic that comes from that. I believe in magic, eligidida. I don't believe in prophecy. Maybe you are magic. Magic is true. Arborellems are not.*

This word again, I repeated. I'd already lost my dignity, and this one, at least, did not seem like an insult. There was nothing to lose by asking. *Arborellems. I don't know it, as well.*

Either, she corrected. The word she used was *Anet. Convocil,* "anet" a "coque." Say, "anet," not "coque." Say, "I don't know it, either," not, "I don't know it, as well."

I filed that information away but shook my head, not that it mattered. The moon disappeared behind a cloud, or traveled out of view of the hayloft, and we were in the dark of all but her eyes once more. *Yes. Anet. I don't know it, either. It sounds like... tree. Arbol.*

Mmm, she said. *I grow tired of your questions, Eligidida.* She started her sentence with something I didn't understand, and then - *the kings - hide - trust - like to keep secrets.*

I didn't catch that, I sighed, frustrated, but she slammed herself back down into the hay - there was no other way to describe it but *slammed*, it was a *slam*, violent and annoyed and deliberately turned so her back was towards me.

I do not care. I am sleeping, eligidida.

Well, I thought, pedantically. *She trusts me enough for me to not run a sword through her back. That's progress.*

I bit my lip, none of my questions answered, but put one hand back to the hilt of my sword and let the hum of it comfort me as I resumed my watch.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show,

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I hope you have a wonderful day.